



FOREST HEALTH INITIATIVE PROJECT

Scoping Report

November, 2015

Project Number: 47969

Mark Twain National Forest

Ranger Districts: Willow Springs, Salem, Potosi, Eleven Point, Poplar Bluff

Missouri Counties: Douglas, Howell, Dent, Iron, Washington, Reynolds, Shannon, Oregon,
Carter, Ripley, Butler, and Wayne

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I. Introduction

The U.S. Forest Service is initiating a public scoping period for a project to conduct vegetative management activities in high risk oak stands on National Forest System (NFS) lands across Southern Missouri. The Forest Health Initiative project area is situated solely on Federal lands administered by the Mark Twain National Forest (MTNF) across multiple counties in Missouri. The analysis area totals approximately 943,982 acres of which 566,071 acres are NFS lands and of this, approximately 46,475 acres are proposed for treatment. See the Vicinity Map on the following page and project treatment maps in Appendix B.

Also within this analysis area boundary are 377,910 acres of private lands. *Private lands are mentioned in this project because the environmental effects of activities on private ownerships are used in our cumulative effects analysis. This project does not direct private landowners, within the project area, any different way of managing their lands than how they currently manage them. Private landowners are not required to respond to this request for comments but we find that any local knowledge and history of the area helps us build a sound environmental analysis.*

Preliminary investigation via aerial detection flights and analysis of recent weather patterns indicate that areas of the MTNF subjected to drought events are experiencing various stages of oak decline and mortality.

This proposal is based on the need to harvest the Red oak group (Red oak, black oak, scarlet oak) and White oak in specific areas before it dies. Some oak sprouting occurs by cutting trees before they die. Since dead oak stumps do not stump sprout, the dead oaks may be replaced by brushy fields consisting of mixed species (including suppressed trees from the understory). The composition of the remaining species would depend on numerous variables. This could result in a shortage of the Red oak group and white oak in the future.

Benefits associated with this project include; enhanced forest health, improved wildlife habitat, reduced susceptibility to insects and disease, identification and protection of historic properties, improved scenic quality, improved safety for forest visitors, and a long-term reduction of heavy fuel loads.

This scoping document summarizes the Forest Health Initiative project proposal with the intent to inform interested and affected parties and to solicit comments. Scoping is an integral part of environmental analysis that is intended to refine the proposed action, identify preliminary issues, explore possible alternatives and probable environmental effects, and identify interested and affected persons. A final decision is tentatively scheduled for Summer 2016. Individuals and organizations (Interested parties) that respond with comments during the scoping period or otherwise indicate an interest will be added to the project mailing list and receive further mailings. For those individuals and organizations that do not respond prior to the end of the scoping period, your name and address will be removed from the project mailing list. For those interested parties, another opportunity to comment on this project will occur during the official 30-day comment period tentatively scheduled for February 2016.

II. Project Location

The Forest Health Initiative project is situated solely on Federal lands throughout southern Missouri on several MTNF Ranger Districts including; Salem, Potosi, Willow Springs, Eleven

INSERT Vicinity Map Here

Point and Poplar Bluff and in the Missouri Counties of: Dent, Reynolds, Iron, Washington, Howell, Douglas, Shannon, Oregon, Carter, Ripley, Butler, and Wayne. The legal description for the Forest Health Initiative project area is: Salem/Potosi Ranger Districts: T33N, R3W; T33N, R2W; T34N, R2W; T32N, R3W; Willow Springs Ranger District: T27N, R10W; T26N, R10W; T26N, R11W; T25N, R11W; Eleven Point Ranger District: T23N, Ranges 2W, 1W, 1E, 2E; T24N, Ranges 3W, 2W, 1W, 1E, 2E; T25N, Ranges 5W, 4W, 3W, 2W, 1W, 1E; T26N, Ranges 5W, 4W, 3W, 1W; T27N, Ranges 4W, 3W; Poplar Bluff Ranger District: T25N, Ranges 6E, 7E; T26N, Ranges 7E, 6E, 4E; T27N, Ranges 3E, 4E, 6E; T28N, Ranges 4E and 5E; Fifth Principal Meridian.

III. Project Development

Collaborative efforts

Collaboration with communities and the public is important to the Mark Twain National Forest. In addition to interacting with the general public, the Forest Service is collaborating with area organizations and agencies to establish priorities, cooperate on activities, and increase public awareness and participation about site-specific projects.

Two initial open, and transparent meetings were conducted on the evenings of September 1, 2015 at the Potosi Ranger District Office (13 attendees), and September 15, 2015 at the Eleven Point Ranger District Office (7 attendees). Each of these public meetings had optional field tours planned for the following morning as well. The purpose of these public meetings was to reach out to potential collaborators, share information on the proposed purpose and need, invite participants to be involved in future collaborative events, share the proposed timeline and have discussions on the intended considerations for project development. Sixteen participants expressed an interest in further collaborative events.

Healthy Forest Restoration Act/2014 Farm Bill

Every five years, Congress passes a bundle of legislation that sets national agriculture, nutrition, conservation, and forestry policy. On February 7, 2014, President Obama signed into law the Agricultural Act of 2014 (commonly called the "Farm Bill"). Among the provisions that pertain to the Forest Service, Section 8204 of the 2014 Farm Bill amends Title VI of the 2003 Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA; 16 U.S.C. 6591) by adding section 602 (Designation of Treatment Areas) and section 603 (Administrative Review) to address qualifying insect and disease infestations on National Forest System lands.

On April 7, 2014, Missouri Governor Nixon sent a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack requesting the designation of 123 sixth-level hydrologic units within Missouri's Mark Twain National Forest as a landscape scale insect and disease treatment area, pursuant to Section 8204 of the Farm Bill. As stated in his letter "*the Mark Twain National Forest in Missouri has 123 sixth-level hydrologic units (sub watersheds) that are qualified for designation under the statute. Based on the 2012 National Insect and Disease Risk Map, 25% or more of the forested area in each of these sub watersheds is in hazardous condition or has significant mapped damage. Therefore, these units are "at risk" of experiencing substantially increased tree mortality over the next 15 years due to insects or disease infestation.*"

On May 20, 2014, Department of Agriculture Secretary Vilsack announced the designation of approximately 45.6 million acres of National Forest System lands across 94 national forests in 35 states to address insect and disease threats that weaken forests and increase the risk of forest fire.

On May 20, 2014, Chief of the Forest Service Thomas Tidwell notified Governor Nixon that the area that was requested to be designated under Section 602 met one or more of the criteria required in Section 602. The Forest Health Initiative Project may be carried out in accordance with Title VI, section 602 (d). This HFRA section provides for expedited NEPA reviews, pre-decisional objection review, and guidance on judicial review. Such designation does not change or exempt the Forest Service from complying with any other existing law, regulation and policy such as the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, National Historic Preservation Act, agency Roadless Rules, and any other applicable law, regulation, and/or policy that affects the designated area.

Additional high risk stands (9,312 acres) were found outside the original HFRA designated boundary in early 2015 and field verified again during our collaborative field tour meetings in September. These additional stands do not currently qualify under Section 602 designation because their watersheds were not within the original 123 watershed designation on the MTNF. The original boundary was based on remote sensing and data from 2013-2014 and were not field verified.

In October, 2015 the MTNF put in a request to have 12 additional watersheds added to the original designation. These additional watersheds contain the additional 9,312 acres of high risk stands.

The 2014 Farm Bill allows for an expedited analysis process and streamlined objection process. However, a managerial decision was made just prior to scoping to not use this expedited analysis process with the Forest Health Initiative project but continue to move forward under a traditional NEPA process while the additional watershed designation process is reviewed.

How the Mark Twain National Forest is moving forward to improve Forest Health

The Mark Twain National Forest has identified an all-inclusive proposal of 46,475 acres of “at risk” stands (of which 37,163 acres fall within the original HFRA designation and 9,312 acres fall outside the designation). The 27 project treatment maps (Appendix B) show this proposal in 50 watersheds across Southern Missouri. Planning of this project is in addition to the Forests’ existing program of work. We are proposing this project to accelerate our entry schedule on out-year planning project areas in the effort to harvest high-risk oak before it dies.

Without this entry, many of these areas would have ecological and economic losses and we would not be reducing the risk or extent of, or increasing the resilience to, insect and disease infestations in these areas. Many of the areas with no activity within the project boundary have been covered under recent project NEPA or are moving forward on current 2015 program of work.

Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

The Mark Twain National Forest 2005 Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) guides all natural resource management activities on the Mark Twain National Forest to meet the objectives of federal law, regulations, and policy. The Forest Plan provides an integrated,

interdisciplinary, programmatic framework for environmentally sound management based on the best available scientific information. It establishes: forest-wide multiple-use goals and implementing objectives, forest-wide management requirements (known as Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines), Management Area direction, including area-specific standards and guidelines, desired conditions and management practices. A management area is a portion of a landscape with similar management objectives and a common management prescription. A copy of the Forest Plan can be found via the internet on the Mark Twain National Forest Website at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/mtnf/plan>. All activities in this project must comply with the Forest Plan.

IV. Purpose and Need for Action

The main objective of this project is to examine opportunities to minimize adverse impacts from insects and disease while protecting other forest resources within the constraints of the Forest Plan. The purpose for proposing management in this project is to achieve the following objectives:

- Reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, insect or disease infestations in designated areas.
- Treat areas of high risk by focusing on the removal of dead and dying white, black, red and scarlet oaks.
- Provide for safety of forest users, adjacent landowners, and other values at risk by reducing hazards from falling debris.
- Recover valuable timber products through harvest.
- Move the Analysis Area toward the Desired Condition identified in the Forest Plan.

When determining how to achieve these objectives, we also considered several other factors.

Treat areas of heavy tree mortality, insect and disease infestation, and oak decline.

As insect and disease infestations become epidemic, infestations spill over into otherwise healthy host trees, putting additional stress on the forest. We need to remove available brood trees to reduce future insect outbreaks.

Adjacent Landowner concerns pertaining to land lines (fence) and project activity access.

As with many projects on the MTNF, accurate established landline boundaries and access to project activities on National Forest System lands will be of concern to many.

Federally listed and proposed species that may have suitable habitat and may occur in the project area.

In project development and refinement, known occupied sites of federally listed and proposed species and sensitive habitats were identified and avoided.

Reduce standing dead or dying trees along utility rights-of way

A number of utility companies have rights of ways across lands managed by the Forest Service. They provide electric and telephone service to both local and non-local users, as authorized under Special Use Permit administration. It is important to assist these companies in providing services to customers, due to needs for electricity for life-support systems, to industry, and communication for emergency and medical professions.

Provide firewood removal areas after treatments are completed.

Many local residents have wood heat as the primary or only source of heat for their homes. They look to the National Forest or dependable supplies of firewood.

Reduce the amount of slash or other vegetation in order to minimize damage from wildland fire.

The public, Forest Service employees, and other agency representatives are concerned about damage and cost to suppress wildland fires due to an increase in dead or dying trees, and increase in heavy fuels that may contribute to more intense wildland fires. Wildland fires that are difficult to control have more potential to cause damage to private property and forest resources. Standing trees can produce a hazard of throwing fire and sparks across control lines. If weakened by fire trees can fall across roads.

Old Growth

Several factors are considered when evaluating stands for old growth designation. They include condition of stand, existing old-growth characteristics, a potential to develop old growth characteristics, location of the stand, and location of sensitive areas that could be better protected with this designation adjacent. In this analysis, special attention will be paid to areas of mortality and the loss of old growth characteristics to previously designated old growth stands.

Reduce the spread of non-native and invasive plants (NNIP)

The proposed vegetative treatments have the potential to spread existing infestations of NNIP in the analysis area. The Integrated Non-Native Invasive Plant Control Project (Record of Decision dated 02/14/2012) would continue to be implemented and includes managing existing and future NNIP infestations through an integrated approach using a combination of chemical, manual, mechanical, and biological control methods.

Discovery of Cultural Resources during Project Implementation

Although the cultural resources surveys completed for this project are designed to locate all archaeological sites and site components that might be eligible for the National Register, such sites and site components may go undetected for a variety of reasons. Pursuant to the provisions found in 36 CFR 800.13 and in the MOU, 2002, Section IV, should any previously unrecorded cultural resources be discovered during project implementation, activities that may be affecting that resource will be halted immediately; the resource will be evaluated by a professional archaeologist; and consultation will be initiated with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), as well as with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, if required, to determine appropriate actions for protecting the resource and for mitigating any adverse effects on the resource. Project activities will not be resumed until the resource is adequately protected and until agreed-upon mitigation measures are implemented with SHPO approval.

Promote healthy forest ecosystems where productivity and sustainability of multiple resources and ecological values are resilient to disturbance.

We need to increase species diversity and begin to change the species composition of the remaining dominant trees to a mix of white oaks, short leaf pine and red oaks. Such a composition better reflects the adapted natural diversity of the forest and woodlands in the Analysis Area, which has been dramatically changed over the last century due to human use and occupation. The change will help make forest vegetation more resilient to natural

disturbances (such as insect outbreaks and extended drought), and result in a healthier future forest that can better withstand the type of stresses acting on today's forests.

V. Proposed Action

In an effort to limit the potential adverse effects of insect infestation on forest health, the Forest Service is proposing a range of management activities on approximately 46,475 acres of National Forest land distributed over a 951,445 acre area located on the Salem, Potosi, Willow Springs, Eleven Point and Poplar Bluff Ranger Districts of the Mark Twain National Forest. Implementation would occur within the next 5 years. Management activities would include commercial timber harvests and reforestation treatments.

Management of forest resources is provided in the Forest Plan approved in 2005. The principal objective in harvesting timber is to promote growth and resilience, or regenerate a stand to maintain it in a healthy vigorous condition to meet a number of resource management objectives. These include enhancing forest health and species diversity, restoring historic natural vegetation and community type, visual management, wildlife habitat, timber quality, and integrated pest management. Specific harvest methods are defined in Appendix D of the Forest Plan. The detailed management actions listed in the document (compartment/stand treatment activity listing see Table A-1 in Appendix A) are given with approximate measures. The following actions are proposed in the project area:

Hardwood Regeneration Harvest

Even-aged methods regenerate and maintain a stand with a single age class. A mix of regeneration methods (526 stands, approximately 9,442 acres) are proposed under this action. The decision on which regeneration harvest method to use is based on desired condition, management objectives, stand conditions, and the silvical characteristics of the species present or desired. In stands with a pine component, selected pines may be removed.

Hardwood Salvage Harvest

Forest health would be improved in 1,038 stands on 21,793 acres through the salvage of merchantable dead and dying black, scarlet, northern red oaks (Red oak group) and white oak. The poor health condition of these stands is a result of oak decline and advanced age. Removal of dead, dying, or damaged trees provides an opportunity to enhance the conditions of terrestrial natural communities, improve current forest health conditions, provide timber and wood products to the local economy, and address hazardous fuel conditions. The proposed action captures mortality that will otherwise be lost due to senescence. In stands with a pine component, selected pines may be removed.

Hardwood Intermediate Harvest

A mix of Intermediate Harvest methods (733 stands, approximately 15,240 acres) are proposed under this action. Uneven-aged methods are also proposed with this action. Uneven aged harvest method maintains a multi-aged structure by removing some trees in all size classes either singly or in small groups. The decision on which intermediate harvest method to use is based on species composition, desired condition, management objectives, stand conditions, and the silvical characteristics of the species present or desired. In stands with a pine component, selected pines may be removed.

Note: After the harvest removes the targeted commercial sized trees in each of the three treatments above, site prep treatments (handtools) would be done to cut down the trees that were too small to sell in the commercial harvest. This will minimize shading and allow seedlings, saplings, and stump sprouts to grow and establish the new stand with adequate stocking of desired species.

Connected and Associated Actions

Connected actions include reconditioning roads (ranging from removing road side vegetation up to road reconstruction), creating temporary roads to access the timber stands, and skid trails. Approximately 150 miles of Temp Roads would need to be constructed to access timber stands. *Note: All of these temporary roads would be closed after they are no longer needed for management activities.*

VI. How To Comment or Receive Additional Information

We invite you to comment on this proposal. Please provide specific written comments that are within the scope of the proposed action, have direct relationship to the proposed action, and include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider. Comments may be submitted in a number of ways:

- **In writing:** Contact, Mark Twain National Forest, 401 Fairgrounds Road., Rolla, Missouri 65401. Attention: Mark Hamel.
- **Hand-delivered:** Written comments must be provided during normal business hours. Office hours at the Mark Twain National Forest Supervisors Office are 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday CST.
- **Facsimile:** Address to: Mark Hamel, Integrated Resource Analyst at 573-364-6844.
- **E-mail responses:** comments-eastern-mark-twain@fs.fed.us. Please include the project name Forest Health Initiative # 47969 on your subject line of the email. Acceptable formats for electronic comments are text or HTML e-mail, Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF), or formats viewable in Microsoft Office applications.
- **Web site viewing:** Duplicate information of this mailing and maps on the management activities described in this document will be located on the Internet at: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/mtnf/projects. Scroll down to the Forest Health Initiative project.
- If additional site specific information is desired on this project, it may be obtained by contacting Mark Hamel, at the Rolla Ranger District Office, 401 Fairgrounds Road, Rolla, Missouri during business hours (8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. CST) at 573-341-7443 or by one of the contact methods shown above.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record of this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to file an objection under 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record but under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and if the request is denied, the agency

will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address.

VII. Public Involvement

Once comments are received at the Supervisors Office after the first phase of Public Involvement, the Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) will evaluate these comments to identify issues and if necessary will develop alternatives to the Forest Health Initiative Proposed Action. The ID Team will then conduct an environmental analysis to determine the effects on forest resources as a result of implementing the proposed actions.

The second phase of public involvement will include a document called “Proposed Action and Preliminary Alternatives for 30-day Comment Period”. This document will describe the Proposed Action and any additional alternatives (developed in detail from scoping comments) and include the environmental effects of implementing the actions on the forest resources. The accompanying letter to this document (sent to Interested Parties) will request written comments once again during the only official 30-day comment period.

Prior to making a final decision on this project, the public will be provided an opportunity to review the complete Forest Health Initiative Environmental Assessment and Draft Decision Notice during the 45-day objection period.

This proposed project is subject to a pre-decisional objection process described in 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B. Only those individuals or entities who submitted timely, specific written comments regarding this proposal during the scoping period or the official 30 day comment period for this project may file an objection.

VIII. Decision To Be Made

William Nightingale, the Forest Supervisor of the Mark Twain National Forest, is the Responsible Official for making all decisions for the Forest Health Initiative project. Given the purpose and need, the deciding official reviews the proposed action, the other alternatives, and the environmental consequences in order to make the following decisions:

- Whether the proposed activities and alternatives are responsive to the issues, accomplish Forest Plan direction, and meet the purpose and need as defined for the Forest Health Initiative Project,
- Which actions or alternative to approve and implement,
- Whether the information in this analysis is sufficient to implement the proposed activities, and
- If the activities can be implemented in a timely manner.

If an action alternative is selected, the decision may include specific mitigation measures.

The decision is not one of land allocation, nor is the analysis intended to look at every possible combination of activities. The scope of the decision will be confined to a reasonable range of alternatives that will meet the project's purpose and need.

The deadline for comments for this initial stage of the Forest Health Initiative project proposal is December 14, 2015.

Table SR-1. A Summary of proposed treatment activities with the number of stands treated and the acres treated in the Forest Health Initiative project.

Proposed Activity	Number of Stands	Treatment Acres
Hardwood Regeneration Harvest	526	9,442
Hardwood Salvage Harvest	1,038	21,793
Hardwood Intermediate Harvest	733	15,240
Project Total	2,297	46,475

For a site specific compartment/stand treatment activity listing see Table A-1 in Appendix A.

PUBLIC COMMENT FORM
FOREST HEALTH INITIATIVE PROJECT

Mark Twain National Forest

Salem, Potosi, Willow Springs, Eleven Point, and Poplar Bluff Ranger Districts

You are invited to comment on this proposal. If you have concerns specific to this project, or if you desire to be kept informed please complete this form and mail it to following address. You may also respond electronically to the following email address: comments-eastern-mark-twain@fs.fed.us (subject line: Forest Health Initiative #47969). If you have any questions, please contact Mark Hamel at 573-341-7443.

Forest Supervisor Bill Nightingale
Mark Twain National Forest Service
401 Fairgrounds Road
Rolla, Missouri 65401

Please return your comments by December 14, 2015.

<i>Name:</i>
<i>Address:</i>
<i>E-mail address:</i>
<i>Phone #:</i>

<i>Comments:</i>

[illegible]